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'Black butter melting and opening underfoot': the 'peat harvest' in Irish literature and culture

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we discuss 'turf-cutting', or the 'harvest' of peat, a centuries-long agricultural practice in Ireland. Although healthy peatlands are known to be carbon sinks, calls for the end of peat cutting are controversial in a country still largely defined by rural traditions. We consider the relationship between peat, peat cutting and identity: the 'bog' features significantly in literature and has played a central role in notions of a specifically gendered version of 'authentic' Irishness. The cutting of peat exposes and destroys cultural heritage in the form of the archaeological record, and we contrast this reality with the representation of peat cutting in the poetry of Seamus Heaney. We then focus on the fiction of Edna O'Brien, for whom the bog is precious, meaningful, culturally and aesthetically, when left in its undisturbed state, or when explored to connect to the past rather than fuel patriarchal desires.

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In this paper, we reflect on the representation of peat ('turf'), the 'turf harvest', and identity in Irish culture. Our focus will be on the ramifications of the historical gendering of the bog, especially in the work of Edna O'Brien, in contrast to the poetry of the late Seamus Heaney, whose literary representations of peatlands are better known. Edna O'Brien has been writing about Ireland for sixty years, conducting a career-long analysis of the destructive effects of Ireland's patriarchal culture, the imperatives of normative heterosexuality embedded in traditional tropes of authentic national identity. Even her detractors recognise the power of her sensitive and detailed evocations of the natural world, though few have noted the significance of peatlands in the fiction. There is a pressing need to radically reorient national attitudes towards these landscapes, requiring a multidisciplinary approach that marries the relevant science, which establishes and outlines the crucial environmental role of peatlands, with a cultural analysis offering ways of valuing 'the bog' historically and aesthetically that do not reinforce a 'masculine' instrumentalist relationship with the natural, which regards it solely as inert material to be exploited. Seamus Heaney's writing often draws directly on the remarkable preserving and hoarding powers of 'the bog', alongside the act of digging and peat cutting as potent metaphors of creativity and identity, but fails to consider the irony that 'the past' is being literally erased through the excavation of peat (Everett and

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Gearey 2019). In contrast, O'Brien's fiction alerts us to the historical damage this kind of appropriative attitude has caused to both humans and nonhumans, while championing in its place qualities historically coded as 'feminine': humility, vulnerability, and receptivity. Like many ecocritical thinkers, O'Brien is concerned to de-centre the human and challenge the inviolable sovereignty of the self, recasting the human as not simply inseparable from, but composed of the nonhuman acknowledges the fact of our linked fates.

The 'bog' has long figured prominently in formations of Irishness from colonial disparagement of the Irish as 'bogtrotters', various works of art and literature, through to contemporary debates around the practice of 'traditional' turf cutting in defiance of the EU-mandated designation of certain areas of raised bogs as Special Areas of Conservation (Renou-Wilson et al. 2011). There has been an extended and at times bitter debate around the requirement to cease turf cutting on these areas that continues to the present day, despite offers of financial restitution and access to alternative peatlands for those individuals and communities thus affected. Additional tensions emerge from the fact that industrial extraction of peat has long provided employment in the midlands of Ireland, areas that otherwise lack significant economic potential. As peat cutting is phased out, mainly due to the depletion of the peatlands, but often cast as a necessary change to a low carbon economy, the importance of a 'just transition' for the communities thus affected is a significant contemporary issue (Toner 2018). The specific place of the bog in Irish culture and identity is particularly important in this context. Feehan and O'Donovan (1996) suggested that: ' … the seasonal turf harvest, and in recent times the mechanical conquest of the peatlands, have woven the bog into the Irish psyche'. Peat cutting may date back as far as prehistoric times, but the greatest impacts have occurred in the 20th century (Renou-Wilson et al. 2011) and the practice remains the subject of passionate debate and controversy. There is continuing tension between this historical treatment of peat as both an economic resource to be exploited for fuel and a cultural reservoir of 'authentic' Irish identity, and current conservation and rehabilitation initiatives: peatlands may thus be described as 'contested landscapes'.

Peatlands, like other wetland environments, are important terrestrial carbon sinks (e.g. Nichols and Peteet 2019), but the long-held perception of these ecosystems as essentially 'wet deserts' (Darling 1955), functionless aside from their value when drained as sources of fuel, continues to dominate many debates. These perspectives inhibit attempts to influence public and hence political opinion in terms of 'wise use' of ecosystems in the context of increasing efforts towards the conservation and restoration of peatlands (see, e.g., Bonn et al. 2016). There are complex connections between formulations of 'Irishness' and the bog in the country's literature. Seamus Heaney's (1969) poem *Bogland* uses the word 'kind' to describe the softly accommodating surface of the bog, 'black butter/ Melting and opening underfoot'. In this poem, the organising power of human sight grudgingly 'concedes' to the bog's 'encroaching horizon'. The peatland landscape is inhospitable, resistant even, to comprehension or interpretation: 'The wet centre is bottomless'. When it relinquishes its treasures, like 'the Great Irish Elk' in *Bogland*, they can conveniently act as symbols of national identity and recalcitrance. As in his other much-discussed 'bog poems', Heaney romanticises and sexualises the human–nonhuman relationship, while using the unknowable past as a tool to comment on present political realities. The poet's projection of 'bog bodies' in the poems *The Tollund Man* (Heaney 1972) and *The Grauballe Man* (Heaney 1975) draws on archaeological interpretations of

these individuals as sacrificial victims of ritualised prehistoric sacrifice. Heaney gestures towards the violence of modern political struggle, but juxtaposes that violence with the soft, 'feminine', yielding bog, which melts and opens under male pressure; the natural world as wife/mother who patiently suffers and absorbs 'masculine' energies and strife (Coughlan 1991, 2007).

Despite the significance of the bog as a physical repository of the past in the form of these 'bog bodies' and other archaeological remains, there is a particular bleak irony behind Heaney's 'bog poems'. Peatlands are exceptional archaeological resources due to the fact that the saturated conditions preserve organic remains that rarely survive on dryland sites. A remarkable range of sites and artefacts have been recovered from Irish bogs (Everett and Gearey 2019), but the processes of exposure and hence discovery (drainage and peat cutting) are also ultimately the agents of destruction, as very few sites are preserved *in situ*. Ironically, this process, which is described in Heaney's poem, *The Tollund Man*, as revealing a: "Trove of the turfcutters'/Honeycombed workings', may act to erase material forms of cultural memory. Another irony is the social importance of hand cutting, for some people is a powerfully nostalgic element of Irish rural childhoods: in part this is related to the occasional discoveries of archaeological 'treasure' during visits to the bog (Finn 2004, 91).

Farming practices in remote parts of Ireland remained largely unmechanised into the latter half of the twentieth century. Agricultural work on the typical small Irish farm throughout the 1960s (and beyond, in some places) was done by draught horses and hand tools, including the scythe and the loy. The loy is an Irish spade, which famously featured as a symbol of inter-generational competition in J.M. Synge's (1907) play, *The Playboy of the Western World*, when Christy Mahon claims to have used the tool to kill his father. Loys were used for tillage as well as for turning sods of turf. Despite centuries of attempts on the part of British authority to 'improve' Irish peatlands, efforts to drain what were considered wastelands, in order to make them 'productive', there are numerous economic, historical, and political reasons for the enduring place of the bog in Irish culture. On a practical level, the steady deforestation of the island from prehistoric times onward and the relative lack of easily accessible coal, created the need for an alternative source of fuel (Renou-Wilson et al. 2011). Because the country was kept economically dependent and backward under colonialism, peat represented a more affordable and readily available fuel. After independence was achieved, the young nation struggled to achieve financial security. What was seen as the vast natural resource of peatland to fuel powerstations for domestic energy needs, led to the establishment in 1933 of the Turf Development Board, Limited, which became the semi-state body Bord na Móna (Peat Board) through the Peat Development Act (1946).

The establishment of Bord na Móna marked a profound shift from the relatively small scale, hand cutting of peat to widespread drainage and mechanised extraction of peat from the midland raised bogs, which accounts for an estimated 3–4 million tonnes/year (Renou-Wilson et al. 2011). This was initially framed as the 'conquest' of the otherwise 'unproductive' wetlands of the country. The phrase 'peat harvest' remains in common usage to the present day, perpetuating a misconception of sustainability. Unfortunately, although recent years have seen an increase in conservation groups and programmes, calls for the end of peat cutting constitute a controversial demand in a country largely

defined by rural traditions, and with a long memory of external authorities making often uninformed decisions about agricultural practices.

The avatar of 'authentic' Irishness, the Western, rural Irishman, primarily engaged in farming, defiant of urbane sophisticates, whether in Dublin or Brussels, developed in nationalist rhetoric beginning in the late nineteenth-century, though ironised in Synge's drama, has endured as a potent symbol well into twenty-first century debates around land use and agricultural policy. Its symbolic status has contributed to the bog becoming an increasingly abstract concept in the Irish imaginary rather than being appreciated as a vital, living landscape in need of protection. The bog has played a central role in evolving notions of a specifically gendered version of Irishness. The hypermasculinity of Irish national identity in the twentieth century, at least in part a reaction to centuries of feminisation and bestialisation of the Irish under British rule, is well documented. The bog often features in narratives and scenes of national resistance. In '*Guests of the Nation*', Frank O' Connor's (1931) famous short story about the War of Independence, young men must prove their soldierly manliness by executing two kind and jocular British prisoners. The men are removed from the warm farmhouse where they have been staying, cared for by an elderly country woman, to a 'little patch of bog', where the men are shot and their bodies dumped, to remain anonymous and irretrievable. The bog is a place of danger, death, trials of masculinity, and martial struggles.

In *The Price of My Soul*, Bernadette Devlin's (1969) memoir of her life during the Troubles in Northern Ireland, she describes such a place: 'Just outside Cookstown, and lying between it and Omagh, there is an expanse of useless bog land known as the Black Bog. Invariably the IRA seems to head for it, and none of them was ever caught. Yet there was no cover: the Black Bog is like a heath … for whatever reason, though the authorities put searchlights on it by night and helicopters over it by day, the Black Bog never gave up an IRA man' (Devlin 1969, 37). The bog acts as a kind of sheltering mother throwing her cloak over those who find refuge with her, the *Sean Bhean Bhocht*, or 'poor old woman', for whom her sons are fighting, one of many traditionally feminine personifications of Ireland. Anecdotally, there are areas of peatland in western Ireland that are avoided to the present day, as they are the alleged burial places of English soldiers, the hated 'Black and Tans', who occupied, fought, and died in Ireland during the War of Independence. A grim harvest to be avoided in the present day; but bog bodies for future generations of archaeologists and poets perhaps?

O'Brien's fiction reconsiders and complicates this nationalist, masculinist dynamic, with implications for understanding the gendering of peatlands and bogs. There is a significant contrast between Heaney's use of the bog as a place of masculine labour with implications of sexualised 'mastery' (Coughlan 1991), for example, and O'Brien's characterisation of peat-cutting as not only a figure but also the literal setting for violence, including rape. Her short story, 'Inner Cowboy' (O'Brien 2011a), features an ecological disaster in a quarry, a place of greedy, heedless exploitation. Witness to the covered-up oil spill, Curly, 'simple', sensitive, and affectionate, referred to by other men in the quarry as a 'retard', is pressured to perform a particular version of masculinity, agreeing to hide a mysterious bag filled with either drugs or money. His first hiding place in his granny's shed, where, amongst the 'stuff in it going back hundreds of years', are 'breast slanes and foot slanes from when turf was cut by hand' (O'Brien 2011a, 92). After weeks of anxiety about what the discovery of

the bag by the authorities might mean for his beloved grandmother, Curly takes the bag to the bog, a 'soft place he prefers to the quarries:

> The quarries were big ugly places, cross places and noisy, flying dust everywhere, showers of it black and gritty, from all the crushing and the blasting. The bogs were more peaceful, stretching to the horizon, a dun brown, with cushions of moss and sphagnum and the turf cut in little stooks, igloos, with the wind whistling through them, drying them out. … At school, the master read from an encyclopedia that bogs were a place to bury butter, to take a shortcut, and to dispose of a murdered one. Curly helped in the bog in the summer, because even though turf was cut with machinery it still needed humans to lay it and foot it and bag it and bring it home. (O'Brien 2011a, 87)

Curly dumps the bag and falls in after it himself, though whether his death is a suicide, an accident, or something more sinister is never discovered

Murder, violence, and legends of military glory associated with the bog contribute to the crisis of a damaged postcolonial Irish masculinity represented through O'Brien's fiction. The centuries-long battle for 'ownership' of Ireland, in which the IRA gunman on the run in her novel *House of Splendid Isolation* (O'Brien 1995) is yet embroiled, haunts a parallel, domestic struggle for dominance and independence remembered by the elderly Josie, whose house the gunman has chosen as his refuge. Josie's late husband, who entertained fantasies about participating in that same national struggle, raped her nightly. One of his cronies, who makes unwanted sexual remarks about Josie, collected turf 'because the tourists go mad for turf fire and the smell it gives out, have themselves photographed in front of it' (O'Brien 1995, 72). The novel opens with a monologue by 'The Child', who appears to be speaking from beneath the soil and might be the spirit of Josie's defiantly aborted foetus, and who describes the earth as ' … so old and haunted, so hungry and replete. It talks. … A girl loves a sweetheart, and a sweetheart loves her back, but he loves the land more.' (O'Brien 1995, 3–4).

The Irish landscape as haunted by historical trauma is something of a cliché, but in O'Brien's work, that landscape is granted volition and an independent voice. The bog speaks metaphorically as well as literally, even in its sometimes-ominous silence. James MacNamara rapes his fourteen-year-old daughter Mary in the bog in *Down by the River* (O'Brien 2000). The scene begins with the father and daughter walking a bog road: 'The road silent, somnolent yet with a speech of its own, speaking back to them, father and child, through trappings of sun and fretted verdure, speaking of old mutinies and a fresh crime mounting in the blood' (O'Brien 2000, 1). They are ostensibly in the bog in order to pursue James's plan to sell sods of turf to tourists, a cynical manipulation of turf's cultural capital implicitly associated with rape in its appearance in both state-of-the-nation novels, *House of Splendid Isolation* and *Down by the River*. The father preparing to sexually assault his daughter in this lonely, remote place 'struck out with [his metal tape] then waved and dandled it to verify both his powers and his riches which had lain so long, prone and concealed, waiting for the thrust of the slane' (O'Brien 2000, 2). Patriarchal structures of church and history, including mythology, implicitly sanction the father's sense of entitlement as he swings the tape 'in an *apostolic* arc', pronouncing his claim over the deserted but fabled landscape. As the rape takes place, the landscape falls sympathetically silent: 'Not a sound of a bird. An empty place cut off from every place else, and her body too, the knowing part of her body getting separated from what was happening down there' (O'Brien 2000, 4). The helpless silence of the abused girl/woman finds an analogue in an

evacuated, 'denaturalised' nature. The 'empty place' is not only the 'down there' of 'unmentionable' female sexuality, but also the 'down there' of the earth itself, particularly the treacherously 'feminine' Irish bog. Blindness to the bog's richness, seeing it as 'empty', echoes and rationalises the traditional view of women's sexuality as 'lack'.

The violent masculine imperative to ownership that assumes equivalence between the appropriation of women and of land is often the subject of O'Brien's fiction. In writing about the bog in the work of another Irish writer, the playwright Marina Carr, Derek Gladwin (2011) has noted the tendency to perceive ' … the bog and women similarly as resources to be owned and dominated … ', which results in a disconnection from the landscape in order to maintain the integrity of the middle-class male subject. The ambivalent charge of this gendering emerges in the ways that the bog figures throughout O'Brien's work. As Dianne Meredith (2002) has observed: ' … bogs are profoundly ambiguous landscapes, lacking exactness in definition.' For many protagonists of O'Brien's mid-career fiction – usually Irish-born women living in London – the bog is an unwelcome reminder of their outsider status, even as it stirs nostalgic longings for home. Nell's bullying lover in *Time and Tide* bruises her feelings by referring to her 'bog accent' (O'Brien 1992, 162). When looking at the label of a bag of fertiliser, she sees 'bog land fringed with green rushes, a loamy backward place … ' confirming her insecurities, causing her to see ' … herself as a bog hole wet and slushy, bog hole' (O'Brien 1992, 150–151), a self-abasement that provokes masochistic sexual fantasies. In 'Send My Roots Rain', the protagonist dreams of going 'home to the loamy land and the brown lakes fed from bog water' (O'Brien 2011b, 168), while divorced and disillusioned Kate, attending a party in *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, answers the question of where she is from by saying 'the West of Ireland. But did not give any echo of the swamp fields, the dun treeless bogs, the dead deserted miles of country with a grey ruin' (O'Brien 1975, 494). Gladwin (2011) describes the bog in Carr's work as ' … an abandoned landscape that has been marginalised and traumatised', and thus mirroring women's experience. 'Home' for O'Brien's Irish characters represents a mixture of obsessive mother love and sexual brutality at the hands of men, sometimes close relations. Home is always the Irish midlands, where the majority of the country's raised bogs are located. As the narrator of *A Pagan Place* describes it, ' … a bleak brown vista, all bog. You knew you were in the centre of the country, the flat basin that you had learnt about in school, but had visualised differently. There were no crops and no pasture and no telling where it ended' (O'Brien 1971, 141).

The traditional schoolbook lessons about the bog, emphasising its uselessness, do not ultimately reflect the power of this particular landscape for O'Brien, for whom it is precious, meaningful, both culturally and aesthetically, especially when left in its undisturbed state, or when explored in order to connect to the past rather than fuel patriarchal or capitalist desires. The bog served as a youthful inspiration for writing, according to O'Brien's memoir:

The bog itself (another venue for my future composition) was a vista of colours that stretched miles and miles to the next parish, where we could see the slate-blue of the church spire. The cut turf was still black, but the sides of the turf bank were a blacker black that oozed bog-water and the heather, blasted by winter winds, bloomed purple and purple-brown. (2012, 39).

The narrator of 'Send My Roots Rain' is appalled and disappointed at the grasping capitalist ethos that appears to have taken over Ireland in the years she was away. Waiting in the lobby of an expensive hotel, she examines 'Pictures on their wall of bog and bog

land, where they no longer set foot, priceless pictures of these lonesome and beautiful landscapes and pictures of bog lilies that lay like serrated stars on pools of bog water'. She walks outside and stops at a statue of Wolf Tone, who represents an earlier version of Irishness defined by home-grown, selfless ideals growing from the most authentically Irish of topographies: ' … flanked by tall pillars of stone, the figure seeming to have emerged from the depths of bog land, the bronze curdles as earth still clung to it and the gaze, that of a man springing to his destiny.' (O'Brien 2011b, 53).

Ireland's destiny as shaped by and shaping the bog was noted in 1974 by the German artist Joseph Beuys when he visited Ireland, which he considered the 'brains of Europe' and said of bogs that they were 'the liveliest elements in the European landscape, not just from the point of view of flora, fauna, birds and animals, but as storing places of life, mystery and chemical change, preservers of ancient history' (cited in Potts 2019, 78). Beuys recognised the importance of peatlands as preserving a physical record of the past in the form of archaeological remains, as outlined above. This is despite the bog figuring historically as uncultivable wasteland, a derogation also reflected in the words found in every European language for marshes, mires, and morasses, all language with gendered implications associated with 'mere' matter and soft formlessness, like Heaney's 'black butter melting', or the 'empty place' of O'Brien's *Down by the River*. O'Brien is acutely aware of the bog's special temporality and its diverse richness. In *Wild Decembers*, for example, a letter describes the old ways of farming, alternately regretting and welcoming innovations. In closing, the letter writer says:

> As for the present, our way of life is changing, but some things remain the same. Take the bogs, the blanket bogs, as they are called; they are sacred places and the storehouse of the past. To dig deep into a blanket bog is to cut through time to unearth history. There is layer after layer of living vegetation, the peat is a haven for wildlife of every kind. Were you to explore it you would find more birds and beasts, and insects than there were in Noah's Ark. (O'Brien 2001, 26)

O'Brien's intimate, emotional connection with the bog landscape of her childhood, a place where she spent much time, allowed her to develop a knowledge of its value, its layers 'of living vegetation', rivalling that of scientists. In addition to human relics, peatlands preserve microscopic material, such as pollen grains that can be extracted and analysed, providing one of the few terrestrial sources of information on anthropogenic disturbances to the Irish landscape, such as woodland clearance and the spread of agriculture (Gearey and Fyfe 2016). In a personal childhood memory, O'Brien again acknowledges this role of the bog in preserving history:

> Along with pasture we had many bogs, some of them uncut so they looked primeval. I did not know what primeval meant but I knew they were ancient bogs with a kind of yellow sprouting grass. … . The lakes, large and small were of a particular dark slate colour and it was easy to believe the legends that cities or civilizations had been swallowed up. There was, to all of it, a sort of supernatural pulse as if pagan and Christian forces joined hands. (Emory Library archive. "County Clare" TS Box 57 Folder 7 Subseries 3.2 Prose 1960-1999)

Bogs have a unique temporality, which Gladwin (2011) suggests 'keep[s] the past and present in flux', further describing them 'as the geographic origin of a long history of uncanny phenomenon in Irish folklore', a phenomenon also noted by Meredith (2002).

Peat 'grows' albeit very slowly, around 1 mm per year and these ecosystems date back several millennia, meaning that Ireland has long been a country with a distinctive wetland landscape; the historical perception of peatlands as 'timeless' arguably arises in part from this longevity There is also the fact that pre-drainage, the depth of many of the larger peatlands remained unknown, contributing to the trope of 'bottomless', perilous wetlands, which were often home to malignant forces, such as the 'Will-o'-the-wisp', one source of many superstitions and warning tales about the bog that represent it as an inhospitable, othered landscape, inimical to man. Social constructions of the bog as occupying a 'different' timeline, out of sync with human temporality, as wasteland, haunted, and supernatural, are connected with conceiving the bog as essentially 'other' to the human, uninhabitable, unwelcoming and uncanny. This is a problem in ecological terms, if such constructions discourage human interests and sympathies, a sense of identification and responsibility. Fisher (2016, 63), discussing 'eerie' English landscapes, including heaths, another kind of wetland, analyses the challenge such landscapes present to ideas about knowledge, the self, human agency. The ancient, alien lore associated with such landscapes compels us 'to imagine our world as a series of eerie traces' of other peoples, other existences, including the nonhuman. Human intellect can achieve no purchase on these recalcitrant landscapes that hold traces of past people and societies, as described above. In unearthing these relics, 'the deep past of humanity is revealed to be in effect an illegible alien civilisation, its rituals and modes of subjectivity unknown to us' (Fisher 2016, 90).

The especially toxic, destructive, hyper-individualistic western subject, as formed in the neoliberal economy of the past several decades, predicated on white, heterosexual, able-bodied masculinity, must quickly learn humility. The time has come for a mature confrontation with the unknown, including the unknowable yet increasingly certain future of some version of encroaching disaster, which defies traditional chronology, a future written into our pasts. The prevailing Judeo-Christian teleology of increase, 'improvement', 'progress', and development, achieved largely by dint of masculinist values of competition, has done possibly irreversible damage. According to Maurice Blanchot (1986, 1), 'We are on the edge of disaster without being able to situate it in the future: it is rather always already past, and yet we are on the edge or under threat, all formulations which would imply the future – that which is yet to come – if the disaster were that which does not come, that which has put a stop to every arrival'. Fisher similarly acknowledges what he calls 'fatal temporality', in which 'we are in the time of the always-already. Where the future has been written, in which case it is not the future, not really?' (Fisher 2016, 91). The paralysing fears these revelations and insights can inspire are potentially mitigated by Rosi Braidotti's (2013) observations regarding the fragile border between life and death and the way in which human preoccupation with our sovereign individuality creates unnecessary dread of what is a natural and not necessarily terminal experience. She argues that death is the inhuman inside us: 'Making friends with the impersonal necessity of death is an ethical way of installing oneself in life as a transient, slightly wounded visitor. We build our life on the crack, so to speak. … The proximity to death suspends life, not into transcendence, but rather into the radical immanence of "just a life", here and now, for as long as we can take' (Braidotti 2013, 132). Humans can still build relationships of solidarity and genuine reciprocity with rural landscapes like the Irish bog, a terrain as cracked and wounded as we are, but it will require 'making friends' across the human/nonhuman we have been trained to see as insuperable.

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